

Composition

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The so-called rules are not carved in stone, and almost every one can be broken if you have a reason for doing so. It's better to think of them as being guidelines rather than strict rules.

The goal of composition is to direct the viewer's eye, keeping it interested and moving around the frame and not out of it. There's an equally important goal: The composition of your photograph should support the idea you had in mind when you decided to take the picture.

Vertical or horizontal. Usually vertical subjects work best in a vertical frame and horizontal ones in a horizontal frame. A horizontal orientation emphasizes the wide expanse of the scene, while a vertical treatment emphasizes depth. Vertical treatments have strength, power, and dignity; horizontal ones are more passive and serene.

Simplification. Including only the essentials is one of the most important keys to good composition. If something doesn't add to the subject, it detracts from it. However, there may be times when you feel showing the subject in its environment tells the story better.

Center of interest. Almost all photographs need a focal point—a main element you want your viewers to look at. If there are two or more subjects of equal importance, the viewer doesn't know what you want him to look at, and his eye bounces back and forth between them. However, you can unify several subjects by having them touch, overlap, look at each other, or look at the same thing..

Directing the viewer's eye. All things being equal, the viewer's eye will be drawn to

- a bright, light area
- an area of high contrast
- the largest element
- something that's different from its surroundings
- something that's isolated
- the area in sharpest focus
- warm colors
- colorful subject
- something human

Centered subject. Placing the subject off center almost always makes a more powerful and pleasing picture than centering it. Centering the subject makes for a static and boring photo, and generally should be avoided. But several types of subjects that work well when centered:

- a single subject that fills the frame
- a symmetrical subject, especially if it's circular
- a subject surrounded by radial lines
- a subject in the middle of two diagonals making an X or V
- a subject surrounded by lines and shapes that lend a feeling of motion
- head shots, especially if the eyes are looking at the camera.

Rule of Thirds. This is an almost infallible guide to placing subjects within the frame. Instead of placing the subject in the center, compose so the main subject is at one of the points of intersection of an imaginary tic-tac-toe grid. Or, if it's a vertical or horizontal subject, place the subject so it lies on one of the lines.

Slicing a picture in half. A line that goes from edge to edge, either horizontally, vertically, or diagonally, has the effect of creating two competing pictures. But splitting the picture in half seems to work well when the dominant shapes in each half are symmetrical, such as in a mirror image.

Placing the horizon. The horizon can go almost any place except across the center, which not only divides the picture in two, but it leads the eye right out of the frame. When in doubt, put the horizon one-third the way from the top or bottom, making the most important part of the scene the largest part.

Lines that set the mood.

Horizontal lines are tranquil and visually most comfortable.

Vertical lines lend a sense of movement; they also convey dignity, strength, and power.

Diagonal lines are very dynamic and can really invigorate a picture.

Curved lines are sensuous and lovely, and have delicacy and grace as well as movement.

Leading lines. These are lines that direct the viewer's attention. It can be an actual line, like a road, fence, river, or bed of flowers. Leading lines can also be implied by the direction of a person's gaze. Intersecting and converging lines are especially strong in leading the eye. The visual pull of a line is strongest if the line enters from the left, at least for those of us who learned to read from left to right.

Arrangement within the frame

Compose so people and things face into the frame, that is they should have the most space in the direction they are looking. Similarly, leave space in the direction a subject is moving. In a full-length picture of a person, leave some space at the top and the bottom to give the viewer's eye room to move around the subject.

Cropping.

Be careful not to crop a person at a joint, causing him to look like he's been amputated. Crop between joints. Don't amputate the ears of an animal or clip off the tips of flower petals. If you're going to crop, crop a substantial amount so it doesn't look like a mistake.

Foreground/background problems

An extensive, blank foreground or a large amount of blank sky detracts from the subject.

Bright blobs of light or bits of white paper draw the viewer's eye away from the subject.

Be sure your subjects are distinct and don't blend in tone or color with other objects.

Be aware of potential "false attachments," background objects that merge with the subject.

Don't let a fragment of something intrude at the edge of the frame

Arrangements that work.

Elements that fall into certain lines or geometric patterns, such as
 the sensuous and extremely beautiful “S” curve
 the single curve of the “C,”
 the complete circle of the “O”
 the triangle or “V,” especially for groups of people and still lifes
 the “L”.

Elements that **echo** each other in either shape or color.

Framing the subject with another object

Balance

Symmetrical balance (also called formal balance). puts the main subject in the center and arranges elements of equal size evenly around it. Use symmetrical balance when the point of the picture is to emphasize symmetry,

Asymmetrical balance (informal balance) distributes the elements in a less rigid manner, according to their visual weights. Asymmetrically balanced pictures seem to be more powerful and generally more pleasing.

If all the elements that attract the eye are on one side of the photograph, the image may seem that it’s about to tip over. It won’t if you balance with a secondary element on the other side.

The more experienced you are, the more you’ll be able to compose your photographs by your gut feeling of what works and what doesn’t, not by what’s “right” or “wrong.”

Suggested readings:.

The Photographer’s Eye by Michael Freeman

Creative Composition by Harold Davis

Master Composition Guide for Digital Photographers by Ernst Wildi